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APPLICATION FOR UNITED STATES LETTERS PATENT
FOR
FENCE ASSEMBLY WITH CONNECTORS

Inventors: James Christopher Cook
Paul R. Pelfrey

Assignee: Crane Plastics Company LLC
Columbus, Ohio

Attorneys: Standley Law Group LLP
Attn: Jeffrey S. Standley
495 Metro Place South, Suite 210
Dublin, Ohio 43017-5319
Telephone: (614) 792-5555
Fax: (614) 792-5536

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CROSS REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS

[0001] This is a divisional of U.S. Application No. 10/243,626, filed September 13, 2002, which claims the benefit of U.S. Provisional Application No. 60/322,074, filed September 14, 2001, each of which is hereby incorporated by reference in its entirety.

BACKGROUND AND SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0002] The present invention relates generally to fences, and more particularly, to fastening a fence segment to another fence segment. Fences have been used in various forms for thousands of years to protect and secure people, animals and land. Fences have also been used to exclude intruders. Specifically, farmers have used fences to contain live stock and domestic animals in a controlled area or to prevent predators from entering. While these functional fence uses continue today, fences are also used for decorative purposes such as on porches and around yards, decks and gardens.

[0003] The type of use a fence is intended to have will have an effect on the type of material used for the fence. Fencing material comes in a wide array of materials, traditionally including wood and wrought iron. However, wood fences tend to require extensive effort to build, need a lot of maintenance and can be difficult to remove or alter. Wrought iron fences also present problems, such as rusting. Recently, plastic has been used in place of wood and metal because it is easier to install, needs little

maintenance and is aesthetically appealing without the problems associated with wood and metal.

[0004] Fence construction and assembly is generally well known. The individual components of a fence are fastened to vertical posts using various types of connectors. Common connectors include nails, screws, bolts, wire and clips. Various connectors exist and are continually developed in order to facilitate fence installation and maintenance.

[0005] The present invention relates to the assembly and installation of decorative fencing and connectors between fence segments of the fencing. The present invention is a fence assembly that may be for relatively short flower garden fence to relatively tall border fence, is aesthetically appealing, and may be used in such places as along roads, and around yards, decks, gardens and flower beds. In one exemplary embodiment, a fence segment may be comprised of two horizontal, hollow channel rails that are substantially continuous for about the entire length of the fence segment. A plurality of vertical pickets or other vertical members may be attached to the two horizontal, hollow channel rails in order to form a fence segment. Each fence segment may then be attached to another fence segment by connectors adapted to be secured to the horizontal, hollow channel rails of the fence segment.

[0006] The present invention provides in-line connectors, living hinge connectors, male/female hinged connectors and end caps, each of which may be adapted to be secured to an end of a horizontal, hollow channel rail of a fence segment. Preferably, the connectors are used to connect the fence segments via the horizontal, hollow channel fence rails. The connectors provide quick and easy installation and maintenance of the fence segments, as contrasted with nails or other fastening devices. The connectors may also be hidden, at least partially, inside the

vinyl rail segments providing an aesthetic appeal to the fence. The end caps may be used when another fence segment does not need to be attached. The end caps provide an aesthetic and protective cover to the end of the horizontal, hollow channel fence rails. The connectors may be adapted to fit by a friction fit or press fit into the hollow channels, or by any other known connection means, such as screws, adhesives, clips, etc.

[0007] The fence segments, connectors and end caps may be made from various types of material. An exemplary material used to make the connectors and end caps, as well as the fence segments, is polyvinyl chloride (PVC). However, the material type is not limited to PVC since the fence segments, connectors and end caps may be made from other materials such as other plastics, woods, or metals.

[0008] In addition to the novel features and advantages mentioned above, other objects and advantages of the present invention will be readily apparent from the following descriptions of the drawings and exemplary embodiments.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0009] Figure 1 illustrates a perspective view of an exemplary embodiment of the fence segments and connector assembly having an in-line connection and a male/female hinged connection.

[0010] Figure 2 illustrates an exploded perspective view of an exemplary embodiment of a fence segment assembly showing the end caps and connectors fitting into the horizontal, hollow channel rails of the fence segment.

[0011] Figure 3 illustrates a perspective view of an exemplary embodiment of an end cap.

[0012] Figure 4 illustrates a side elevation view of an exemplary embodiment of an end cap.

[0013] Figure 5 illustrates a side elevation view of an exemplary embodiment of an in-line connector.

[0014] Figure 6 illustrates a perspective view of an exemplary embodiment of an in-line connection formed by the in-line connectors and the horizontal, hollow channel rails of the fence segments.

[0015] Figure 7 illustrates an end view of an exemplary embodiment of a living hinge connector.

[0016] Figure 8 illustrates a plan view of the living hinge connector shown in Figure 7.

[0017] Figure 9 illustrates a perspective view of an exemplary embodiment of a fence segment assembly showing the living hinge connectors fitting into the horizontal, hollow channel rails of a fence segment.

[0018] Figure 10 illustrates a side elevation view of an exemplary embodiment of a female component of a male/female hinged connector.

[0019] Figure 11 illustrates a plan view of the female component of Figure 10.

[0020] Figure 12 illustrates a side elevation view of an exemplary embodiment of a male component of a male/female hinged connector.

[0021] Figure 13 illustrates a bottom plan view of the male component of Figure 12.

[0022] Figure 14 illustrates a perspective view of an exemplary embodiment of the male/female hinged connection formed by the male/female hinged connectors and the horizontal, hollow channel rails of the fence segments.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF EXEMPLARY EMBODIMENT(S)

[0023] An overall arrangement of an exemplary construction of the fence segments **30**, the in-line connector **70** and the male/female hinged connector **90** is shown in Figure 1. An in-line connector **70** may be used to attach fence segments **30** so that a substantially straight line is formed by the fence segments **30**, while a male/female hinged connector **90** or a living hinge connector **80** may be used to form a corner or a varied degree of bend between the fence segments **30** thereby defining a fence.

[0024] Each fence segment **30** may be comprised of at least one horizontal, hollow channel rail **34**. At least one vertical picket post **36** may be attached to the horizontal, hollow channel rails **34** in order to form a fence segment **30**.

[0025] An exemplary method of assembly of the fence segments **30** and connectors is depicted in Figure 2. First, at least one ground stake **32** may be inserted into the ground in a location where a fence segment **30** is to be placed. A fence segment **30** may then be placed over the ground stake **32**. Specifically, one of the hollow vertical picket posts **36** may be positioned over the fixed ground stake **32** as the fence segment **30** is lowered into place. The ground stake **32** provides stability and stationary support to the fence segment **30**. Once the fence segment **30** is in place, a connector **70**, **80**, **90** and/or an end cap **50** may be inserted into the ends **38** of the horizontal, hollow channel rails **34** of the fence segment **30** in a secure manner, such as, but not limited to, by friction fit, press fit or adhesive bonding. The type of connector **70**, **80**, **90** or end cap **50** used will depend on the desired arrangement of fence segments **30**.

[0026] After a connector is inserted into the horizontal, hollow channel rails **34** of a fence segment **30**, another fence segment **30** may be attached to the reciprocal

end of the connector. This allows the fence segment **30** to be positioned in order to conform to the desired fence arrangement. If an end cap **50** is used instead of a connector, and the fence may end at that point.

[0027] Each connector may have a basic body configuration similar to the end cap **50**. An exemplary embodiment of an end cap **50** is depicted in Figures **3** and **4**. An end cap **50** may be comprised of a first side wall **52** and a second side wall **54**. A first end wall **56** and a second end wall **58** may be attached to the side walls **52, 54** forming a generally rectangular channel body **60**. The first side wall **52** and second side wall **54** may be about equal in length and may be about parallel, while the first end wall **56** and second end wall **58** may be about equal in length and may be about parallel. The side walls **52, 54** may be of a length greater than the length of the end walls **56, 58**. A terminal wall **62** may be attached to the rectangular channel body **60** at one of the two faces such that the terminal wall **62** may be about perpendicular to the side walls **52,54** and end walls **56,58**. The terminal wall **62** may be of such a size that it is slightly larger than the perimeter of the channel body **60** so that a ledge **64** may be formed around the entire perimeter of the channel body **60**. Also, it should be recognized that the terminal wall **62** in some embodiments may have an inner aperture defined by ledge **64**. The configuration of the terminal wall **62** and the rectangular channel body **60**, defined by a first side wall **52**, second side wall **54**, first end wall **56** and second end wall **58**, preferably forms an end cap **50**.

[0028] The size of the rectangular channel body **60**, defined by the first side wall **52**, second side wall **54**, first end wall **56** and second end wall **58**, may be such that a friction fit is formed when the channel body **60** is inserted into a horizontal, hollow channel rail **34** of a fence segment **30** and the outer surfaces of the channel body **60** come in contact with the inner surface of the horizontal, hollow channel rail **34** of a

fence segment **30**. The channel body **60** may be inserted into the horizontal, hollow channel rail **34** until the ledge **64** of the terminal wall **62** comes in contact with the end **38** of the horizontal, hollow channel rail **34**. This prevents the end cap **50** or connectors from being inserted too far into the end **38** of the horizontal, hollow channel rail **34** and provides a secure fit for the end cap **50** or connectors.

[0029] Each of the connectors may have a body configuration similar to the end cap **50**, with the addition of a connecting element attached to the terminal wall **62**. An exemplary embodiment for a friction fit in-line connector **70**, as shown in Figure 5, contains a channel body **60** with terminal wall **62** configuration. As a connecting element, a second channel body **60'** may be attached to the terminal wall **62** in a similar manner as the first channel body **60** may be attached to the terminal wall **62**, as described above.

[0030] When an in-line connector **70** has been inserted into a fence segment **30**, a horizontal, hollow channel rail **34** of a second fence segment **30** may then be positioned over the second channel body **60'** of the friction fit in-line connector **70** in a similar manner as described above. The arrangement of attaching two fence segments **30** by friction fit in-line connectors **70** is depicted in Figure 6.

[0031] Another exemplary embodiment of a connector may be a hinged connector. An exemplary embodiment of a hinged connector may be a living hinge connector **80** as shown in Figures 7 through 9. The exemplary embodiment of a living hinge connector **80** may be formed by affixing two end caps **50a**, **50b** together with a flexible joining member **82**. Specifically, a flexible joining member **82** may affix a first peripheral edge **66a** of a terminal wall **62a** on a first end cap **50a** to a second peripheral edge **68b** of a terminal wall **62b** on a second end cap **50b**. When the two end caps **50a**, **50b** are affixed to form a living hinge connector **80**, the

flexible joining member **82** may form a continuous face with the outer surface of each of the terminal walls **62a**, **62b** on each of the end caps **50a**, **50b**, as shown in Figure 7. The flexible joining member **82** may be comprised of the same material as each end cap **50a**, **50b** and may be of a sufficient thickness and flexibility to allow flexing in either direction when forces are applied.

[0032] The channel body **60a** of the first end cap **50a** of a living hinge connector **80** may be inserted into an end **38** of a horizontal, hollow channel rail **34** of a fence segment **30**, while the channel body **60b** of the second end cap **50b** of a living hinge connector **80** may be inserted into a horizontal, hollow channel rail **34** of another fence segment **30**. Both channel bodies **60a**, **60b** of the living hinge connector **80** may form a friction fit or press fit with the corresponding horizontal, hollow channel rail of the fence segments, as described above. The living hinge connector **80** may be flexed, at the flexible joining member **82**, to various degrees in order to form the desired fence arrangement.

[0033] Another exemplary embodiment of a hinged connector used in conjunction with the fence assembly of the present invention may be a male/female hinged connector **90** as depicted in Figures **10** through **14**. This connector may preferably be a two component assembly, namely a female component **92** and a male component **102**. Each component **92**, **102** may contain a similar channel body **60** with terminal wall **62** configuration, as in forming an end cap **50**, as the base of each component **92**, **102**. A connecting element **94**, **104** may be attached to the outer face of the terminal wall **62c**, **62d** of each component **92**, **102**.

[0034] The connecting element for a female component **92** is shown in Figures **10** and **11**. The female connecting element **94** may be comprised of an arm **100c** attached to the outer surface of the terminal wall **62c** of the end cap base **50c**. In an

exemplary embodiment, the arm **100c** may be affixed slightly below the midpoint of the terminal wall **62c**. The arm **100c** may project from and may be approximately perpendicular to the outer surface of the terminal wall **62c**. An aperture **96** may be located near the free end **98c** of the arm **100c**. The aperture **96** may be of a size that will accept and lock in a male connecting element **104** of a male component **102** of a male/female hinged connector **90**.

[0035] The connecting element for a male component **102** is shown in Figures **12** and **13**. The male connecting element **104** may be comprised of an arm **100d** attached to the outer surface of the terminal wall **62d** of the end cap base **50d**. For example, the arm **100d** may be affixed slightly above the midpoint of the terminal wall **62d**. The arm **100d** may project from and may be approximately perpendicular to the outer surface of the terminal wall **62d**. A circular array of projections **106** may be attached to and extend downwardly from the bottom surface of the arm **100d** near its free end **98d**. An exemplary embodiment of the male component **102** may have four curved projections **106** that may be about the same size and length, and may be about equidistant apart. However, the male component **102** may have one or any number of variously shaped projections. In an exemplary embodiment, the circular array of projections **106** has a diameter that is able to fit into the aperture **96** on the female connecting element **94**.

[0036] Each projection **106** may have a lip **108** near the free end of the projection **106**. The lip **108** may be about parallel to the free end of the projection **106** and may be used to lock the male connecting element **104** into the aperture **96** of the female connecting element **94** once the circular array of projections **106** has been inserted into the aperture **96**. This may allow the male and female connecting elements **104**,

94 to interlock while allowing pivotal rotation of the hinging mechanism of the male/female hinged connector **90**.

[0037] The channel bodies **60c**, **60d** of the male component **102** and the female component **92** of the male/female hinged connector **90** may each be inserted into an end **38** of a horizontal, hollow channel rail **34** of a fence segment **30** in a similar manner as described above and depicted in Figure **14**. Specifically, the female component **92** may be inserted into the horizontal, hollow channel rails **34** of a fence segment **30**, while the male component **102** may be inserted into the horizontal, hollow channel rails **34** of another fence segment **30** that is to be connected. This male/female hinged connector **90** may be pivoted to various degrees and in either direction in order to form the desired fence arrangement.

[0038] An exemplary material used to make the fence segments **30**, connectors **70**, **80**, **90** and end caps **50** is polyvinyl chloride (PVC). However, a variety of other materials, such as other plastics, woods, and metals, may be used. The segments, connectors, and end caps may be extruded, compression molded, injection molded or made using any other suitable techniques.

[0039] As discussed in detail above, the present invention allows for a various number and arrangement of fence segments, connectors and end caps to be used in order to form a desired fence assembly.

[0040] The exemplary embodiments herein disclosed are not intended to be exhaustive or to unnecessarily limit the scope of the invention. The exemplary embodiments were chosen and described in order to explain the principles of the present invention so that others skilled in the art may practice the invention. Having shown and described exemplary embodiments of the present invention, those skilled in the art will realize that many variations and modifications may be made to affect

the described invention. Many of those variations and modifications will provide the same result and fall within the spirit of the claimed invention. It is the intention, therefore, to limit the invention only as indicated by the scope of the claims.